

TEACHINGS OF THE SIDHAS

PART 4 – THE BREATH



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Cover: A digitally composed picture of Tavayogi Thangarasan Adigal at the footsteps of the Sri Thandayutapani Temple in Batu Caves, Malaysia

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INTRODUCTION

We have covered the first steps of the eight fold path of Astanga Yoga or Raja Yoga that one on the path of the sidhas has to uphold, in part three of this series, 'Teachings of the Sidhas'. After Yama and Niyama we now move on to Asanas and Pranayama.

When Tavayogi Thangarasan Adigal of the Sri Agathiyar Gnana Peedham Thirukovil in Kallar, Coimbatore taught us some asanas and breathing techniques (See Appendix for a series of photographs on the asanas and breathing techniques as demonstrated by Tavayogi himself) when he was in Malaysia in 2005, none of us realized the value of his teaching then. Later Agathiyar in the nadi (palm leaf reading) mentions that it is a treasure chest that he has delivered to us. True enough upon further reading I realized the importance of asanas and Pranayama for one seeking the divine.

Asanas

B K S Iyengar in 'LIGHT ON THE YOGA SUTRAS OF PATANJALI', HarperCollins Publishers India, 1993, explains asana is moving into various positions, finding perfection in the pose and maintaining it, and reflecting on it. Only when effortful effort in an asana becomes effortless effort, one has mastered the asana. He says each asana has to become effortless.

Performing asanas with effort, concentration and balance forces us to live intensely in the present moment, says Iyengar.

'... being in the present, has both a strengthening and a cleansing effect: physically in the rejection of disease, mentally by ridding our mind of stagnated thoughts or prejudices; and, on a very high level where perception and action become one, by teaching us instantaneous correct action; that is to say, action which does not produce reaction. On that level we may also expunge the residual effects of past actions.'

'To advanced students, a teacher teaches a whole asana in relationship to what is happening in a single action.'

'And when the student then learns how the minutest modifications of a toe can modify the whole asana, he is observing how the microcosm relates to the whole, and the organic completeness of universal structure is grasped.'

Iyengar assures that the body is the temple of the soul and it can truly become so if kept healthy, clean and pure through the practice of asanas.

Tavayogi Thangarasan Adigal in his book, 'ATMA TARISANAM' (available at <http://www.scribd.com/doc/16727585/Atma-Tharisanam-Tamil-Revised-Edition>) mentions that there are 84 major asanas coinciding with 8,400,000.00 species on the face of the earth. Tavayogi quotes from Agathiyar's Saumiya Sagaram, verse 250, where it is mentioned nine asanas that are of utmost importance. The asanas are Go-mukha-asana, Padma-asana, Vira-asana, Simha-asana, Path-e-asana, Mukta-asana, Mayura-asana, Vajra-asana and Suga-asana.

It is necessary to find a posture in which we can remain long. Then a practice called naadi suthi or purifying of the nerves through alternate nostril breathing follows. Once the nerves are purified then Pranayama can be performed efficiently.

Swami Vivekananda in his book, 'RAJA YOGA – Conquering the Internal Nature', Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1998, guides us on naadi suthi,

‘Stopping the right nostril with the thumb, through the left nostril fill in air, according to capacity; then, without any interval, throw the air out through the right nostril, closing the left one. Again inhaling through the right nostril eject through the left; practicing this three or five times at four hours of the day, before dawn, during midday, in the evening, and at midnight, in fifteen days or a month purity of the nerves is attained; then begins Pranayama.’

Vivekananda explains why one needs to select a particular hour of the day for these practices.

‘The early morning and the early evening are the periods of calmness. Your body will have a like tendency to become calm at those times. We should take advantage of that natural condition and begin then to practice.’

Vivekananda adds that practice is absolutely necessary.

‘Simply listening to explanations and theories will not do. With practice, within a few days a little glimpse will come, enough to give one encouragement and hope.’

Swami Vivekananda explains further in ‘RAJA YOGA – Conquering the Internal Nature’, Advaita Ashrama, Calcutta, 1998,

‘We shall gradually see the reasons for each exercise and what forces in the body are set in motion. All things will come to us, but it requires constant practice. No amount of reasoning which I can give you will be proof to you, until you have demonstrated it for yourselves. As soon as you begin to feel these currents in motion all over you, doubts will vanish, but it requires hard practice everyday.’

Vivekananda reminds us that the aim, the end, the goal of all this training is liberation of the soul and absolute control of nature. Man alone attains perfection, not even the Devas says the Swami. The human birth is necessary to free oneself. The body is the best instrument we have to achieve this purpose. He says the body has to be kept fit.

Pranayama

After Tavayogi Thangarasan Adigal took me on a tour of some sidha samadhi, caves and temples in Tamilnadu and upon returning to his hermitage in Kallar on 28 September 2005, I told him I did not want this trip to end like any other tour of pilgrimage spots. I needed something to work on. I asked him what I was to do now. He stared at me for a while before answering. He asked if I was chanting Agathiyar’s mantra regularly. Then he passes me a technique of breathing and asked me to work on it. He told me I had to put in lots of practice. He told me in Tamil, ‘Vaasiye Kadavul’, its translation being, Breath is God.

Tavayogi Thangarasan Adigal in his book, ‘ATMA TARISANAM’ quotes a sidha song, to support his claim, ‘Moochapa Theivam Endru Munnor Sonnar, Munivargalum Sidhargalum Athaithan Sonnar’.

Tavayogi says, to control Prana is Pranayama. Prana is the vital force that moves this universe and all of creation. The force that moves this universe moves the individual too. It enters the individual through and along ones breath.

Tavayogi quotes the sidha Tirumoolar, ‘The one who masters the art of inhaling, retaining and exhaling of breath need not fear death - he overcomes death.’

Tavayogi says whatever forces in motion in the universe are also available in the individual as subtle forces. One who harnesses these forces conquers nature and gains control over it. The control of Prana leads to deathlessness.

Swami Vivekananda says to get into the subtle perception, we need to begin with the grosser perception. From the external we move to the internal. Use the breath to slowly enter the body and find out the subtle forces at work in the body. The whole world is in motion because of Prana. The most obvious manifestation of Prana is the breath, says the Swami.

‘To reach the subtle we must take the help of the gross, and so, slowly travel towards the most subtle until we gain our point.’

Swami Vivekananda summarizes beautifully what we should do.

‘In this body of ours the breath motion is the “silken thread”; by laying hold of and learning to control it we grasp the pack thread of the nerve currents, and from these the stout twine of our thoughts, and lastly the rope of Prana, controlling which we reach freedom.’

Begin with Pranayama, i.e. restraining the Prana. Control Prana and you have ultimate control over all things. Swami Vivekananda adds,

‘The Prana is the vital force in every being. All manipulations of the subtle forces of the body, the different manifestations of Prana, if trained, give push to the mind, help it to go up higher, and become super conscious, from where it acts. All this bringing of the mind into a higher state of vibration is included in one word in yoga - Samadhi.’

We are moved by Prana to inhale and exhale. Swami Vivekananda guides us further,

‘By taking up and controlling the motion of the lungs; when we have done that for a sufficient length of time, we shall be able to control the finer motions.’

‘Every part of the body can be filled with Prana, this vital force, and when you are able to do that, you can control the whole body. Great prophets of the world had the most wonderful control of the Prana, which gave them tremendous willpower; they had brought their Prana to the highest state of motion and this is what gave them power to sway the world. All are parts of the same ocean of Prana; they differ only in their rate of vibration.’

From ‘THE SCIENCE OF BREATH’ by Yogi Ramacharaka, W. & J. Mackay & Co. Ltd., Chatham, 1903, the author says,

‘..... Prana, the principle of energy exhibited in all living things, which distinguishes them from a lifeless thing. It is taken up by the system along with the oxygen, and yet is not the oxygen.’

‘Prana is the name by which we designate a universal principle, which principle is the essence of all motion, force or energy, whether manifested in gravitation, electricity, the revolution of the planets, and all forms of life, from the highest to the lowest. It may be called the soul of Force and Energy in all their forms, and that principle which, operating in a certain way causes that form of activity which accompanies Life.’

‘Just as is the oxygen in the blood used up by the wants of the system, so the supply of Prana taken up by the nervous system is exhausted by our thinking, willing, acting, etc., and in consequence constant replenishing is necessary.’

Swami Rama in ‘MEDITATION AND ITS PRACTICE’, the Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy of the U.S.A, 1992, mentions,

‘Prana is a word that means ‘the first unit of energy,’ a subtler level of energy within the human being, which is the link between the body and the mind. Pranayama practices allow the student to channel and balance the flow of this subtle energy, which is responsible for the well-being and coordination of all the body’s functions.’

R. R Diwakar in his foreword to B K S Iyengar’s ‘LIGHT ON PRANAYAMA’, HarperCollins Publishers, India, 2004, says,

..In yoga, Prana (in all its five aspects in man of Prana, Apana, Vyana, Udana and Samana) is the very essence of the energizing principle of the animate and inanimate world. It pervades the whole universe. And Pranayama means the full control of that energizing principle in one’s own being by a certain discipline. This discipline aims not only at good health, an equilibrium in the physical and vital energies, but also the purification of the whole nervous system in order to make it more capable of responding to the will of the yogi in controlling the sense-urges, and in making the mental powers more subtle and sensitive to the call of the evolutionary urge, the higher divine nature in man.’

Swami Rajarshi Muni in his book ‘YOGA-THE ULTIMATE ATTAINMENT’, Jaico Publishing House, 2004, states,

‘Prana is the highest form of matter, and matter is the lowest form of Prana. It is manifested to a high degree in the causal body, to a medium degree in the subtle body, and to a low degree in the gross body.’

‘Prana in the human body manifests as physical activities on the gross level, and as mental activities on the subtle level. Thus it sets both body and mind in motion and serves as a link between the gross and subtle bodies.’

‘Impurities in the physical body (malas) prevent the clear experiencing of the subtle body. The gross body is purified through the adoption of a reduced and simple diet, the practice of celibacy, and other purificatory exercises ...’

‘When an aspirant of yoga learns to fully awaken personal Prana, or inner life-energy, and release it from the control of the conscious ego-mind, Prana itself then automatically and spontaneously moves the body through the various purificatory movements.’

‘As a result of this purification, the aspirant gradually transcends the level of extroverted consciousness and begins to attain refined experiences of the subtle body. Subsequently, the individual proceeds to purify the subtle body in order to attain still higher experiences. For that purpose he or she allows advanced yoga techniques, such as the withdrawal and concentration of the mind, to spontaneously arise through the release of Prana, the vital force.’

Swami Rajarshi Muni agrees with Avvai, Sankara and Vivekananda that the human body is the only fit vehicle for seekers who wish to tread the path of conscious spiritual evolution. He says when Prana is regulated and properly directed, it can charge the various parts of the body, purifying and rejuvenating them. He quotes the Yoga Chudamani Upanishad in his book 'YOGA-THE ULTIMATE ATTAINMENT', Jaico Publishing House, 2004,

'From Prakriti's inexhaustible reservoir the human body draws Prana for carrying out its biological functions throughout its lifespan. Prana is extracted from Prakriti as subtle energy. When stored in the human apparatus, it acts as the essential power source for carrying out bodily functions.'

'Oxygen is capable of sustaining only the gross body, while the vital force nourishes and sustains the subtle body. This vital force flows through the channels of the subtle body and can rejuvenate even the gross body, increasing its longevity.'

In a footnote in his book 'AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A YOGI', Self-Realization Fellowship, 1990, Yogananda mentions that atoms and electrons are blind forces, Prana is inherently intelligent. The Pranic lifetrans in the spermatozoa and ova, for instance, guide the development of the embryo according to a karmic design.

Swami Rama in 'MEDITATION AND ITS PRACTICE', the Himalayan International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy of the U.S.A, 1992, says,

'Inhalation and exhalation are the 'vehicles' through which the Pranas - the vital force- travel in the body.

Paramahansa Yogananda mentions in his 'AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF A YOGI', Self-Realization Fellowship, 1990, that a yogi's body loses its grossness after use of certain Pranayama. He adds,

'Offering the inhaling breath into the exhaling breath and offering the exhaling breath into the inhaling breath, the yogi neutralizes both breaths; thus he releases Prana from the heart and brings life force under his control.'

Rajarshi clarifies further,

'... Prana travels through the subtle body by means of subtle channels known as Ida and Pingala. These subtle channels, like the gross air passages, have their upper ends at the openings of the left and right nostrils. But they do not end up in the lungs like the respiratory system of the gross body. Instead they run down to a bulbous subtle structure (Kanda) situated about three inches below the navel of the gross body.'

Rajarshi too recommends alternate nostril breathing as did Swami Vivekanda earlier,

'This is considered a powerful exercise in creating Pranaprabalya, or the strengthening of Prana, as well as the purification of the Nadis. The more Pranayama is done, the more Prana is stored in the Kanda.'

R. Venu Gopalan explains in his book, 'THE HIDDEN MYSTERIES OF KUNDALINI', B. Jain Publishers (P) Ltd, New Delhi, 2001,

'The origin of the Nadis is called Kanda. All the important Nadis emerge from this astral centre and do the major activity of carrying the Prana.'

Yogananda explains further,

‘The mystery of life and death, whose solution is the only purpose of man’s sojourn on earth, is intimately interwoven with breath. Breathlessness is deathlessness. Realizing this truth, the ancient Rishis of India seized on the sole clue of the breath and developed a precise and rational science of breathlessness. The life currents, operating in the human body as the fivefold Prana or subtle life energies, are an expression of the AUM vibration of the omnipresent soul.’

‘When the breath-link between soul and body is severed by evolutionary karma, the abrupt transition called "death" ensues; the physical cells revert to their natural powerlessness.’

From ‘THE SCIENCE OF BREATH’ by Yogi Ramacharaka, W. & J. Mackay & Cg. Ltd., Chatham, 1903, the author says,

‘When the Ego leaves the body, the Prana, being no longer under its control, responds only to the orders of the individual atoms, or groups of atoms, forming the body, and as the body disintegrates and is resolved to its original elements each atom takes with it sufficient Prana to enable it to form new combinations, the unused Prana returning to the great universal storehouse from which it came.’

B K S Iyengar in ‘LIGHT ON PRANAYAMA’, HarperCollins Publishers, India, 2004, says,

‘The practice of Pranayama helps to cleanse the Nadis, which are tubular organs of the subtle body through which energy flows. The respiratory system is the gateway to purifying the body, mind and intellect. The key to this is Pranayama.’

We end this article with an advice from Swami Rajarshi Muni,

‘So long as Prana is restrained in the body, the soul does not leave the body. Then there is no fear of death. Hence one should practice the regulation of Prana.’

APPENDIX

The video of Tavayogi performing the following asanas and breathing techniques can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Byx1CuxhinE>





